

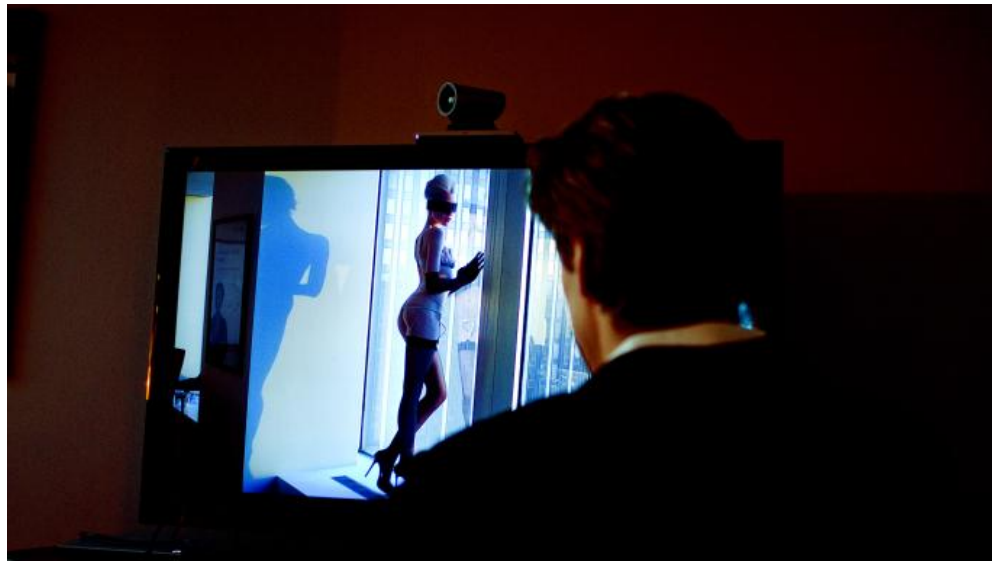
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Confessions of a porn addict

For 20 years novelist Benjamin Obler had an addiction. Outwardly happy, successful and able to form relationships, in private he compulsively watched pornography. Here he describes a habit few men ever admit to

Benjamin Obler

December 17 2016, 12:01am, The Times



MICHAEL DONOVAN/THE LICENSING PROJECT



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2010

It's 7am on a Tuesday in January and I plunk quarters into a parking meter outside the Center for Sexual

Health, a clinic on the campus of the University of Minnesota. The temperature is minus 3C, a dark winter morning. I scurry into the building, thinking of the admission I must make: this past week, I looked at internet porn.

I had meant not to. In fact, it was the last thing I wanted to do. On top of that, it was nothing like the escape it used to be. Clicking around some of my favourite sites, I had been pestered by my new self-awareness. I am inclined to keep it to myself. But I know that won't help.

This is my Compulsive Sexual Behaviour men's talk-therapy group, where I go every Tuesday morning for two hours before work.

At the front desk, I sign in. I'm issued two sheets of paper, one green, one yellow. At a private desk in the lobby, I fill them out. The first section on "the Green Sheet", as we call it, includes rows of symptoms, beside which I put an x for yes or no. With each I must consider the preceding week: have I been moody, depressed, irritable, anxious? Did I have sleeping or eating problems? Was I easily distracted? Was there conflict or fighting at home? In my first months here, my answers were almost entirely yes, but more and more, they are becoming no.

The yellow sheet is shorter but more severe. On the linear scale for how frequently I've been fantasising, I put an x at the "Infrequently" end. The yellow sheet ends: "Risk Situation Y/N? Boundary violation Y/N?" I mark yes for both and head into the group room. I've

made a trade-off: I'll bear the shame of failure - a slip - and enjoy the satisfaction of honest compliance. This, after all, is like school, and I am student looking for a good grade and, ultimately, graduation.

I enter our meeting room - within a minute or two, it fills with seven other men and we're all seated. Precisely at 7.30, Dr Zamboni says, brightly inquisitive, "Should we get started?"

This is check-in. We report on our emotional states, our fights with our wives or partners, our stress levels, whether we took part in any dangerous sexual behaviour, whether we experienced any loss of sexual desire. These are all negatives; one positive is if we've socialised - called or emailed anyone, and if so, whom. (Porn addicts tend to be isolated.) We report what we did for relaxation (activities other than looking at porn, of course).



GALLERY STOCK

The final component of check-in is raising our other concerns, and stating our goal for the session - namely,

and most importantly, whether we wish to “take time”. Taking time means talking – talking in depth, usually about crises: porn looked at, chat lines used, prostitutes visited, the stranger slept with; how it happened, what you’re going to do about it, how to prevent it from happening again. (My compulsive behaviour was limited to online porn, though I also went a little crazy with online poker for a while. Others in my group used hard drugs and sought risky situations such as random hook-ups.) Taking time means scrutiny, facing the facts, coming clean.

It’s not what any man would choose to do before work on a Tuesday. But we are not any men. We are desperate men. Our marriages, our families, our sanity, our freedom, and in some cases our lives are at stake.

1984

I still remember the first time that I saw pornography, or maybe it was just one early, memorable example: a photo gallery of a woman tossed up on a beach like a piece of driftwood. Leaping over the surf, breasts buoyant. Close-ups of her goose bumps. The shocking candour of the willing revelation of her body, a thing that the girls in school concealed with folded arms, sweaters pulled down, legs crossed.

The household in which I grew up held a library of pornography in a certain two-drawer cabinet. Three or four of the glossies of the day were kept there, face down (which said everything to me). Afternoons alone in the house after school, I already was in the habit of prowling through rooms for interesting things to learn about. My

brother and I had tasted crème de menthe, smoked cigarettes, flipped through the pages of *The Joy of Sex*.

These are all natural inclinations, I might add. One thing I quickly understood from the men's talk-therapy group is that everyone has that discovery incident. People ask me if I wish I'd never stumbled on that illicit stash. No. Things might have worked out differently if I'd discovered it later, but discovering our sexual selves is natural. It's the frequency of my return visits that I regret, and the way I turned to them for succour.

My mother worked evenings as a nurse; Dad taught at a high school and stayed afterwards, grading, hosting detention, tutoring. My brother was a sportsman and often away at practice. Most afternoons after school, I was free to visit the library again.

This is where rituals began. I was nervous enough about being discovered to duck under the window facing the neighbour's house. I'd sit on the floor, pull the drawer open slowly, mindful that the tall piles could tip. I'd take out issues, memorising the order I'd found them in. Because of the depth of the collection, I could mine for new content, much like I'd be able to do later on the internet.

Sometimes, someone would arrive home while I was in the act. I'd hear a car in the driveway, the garage door rattling open. Panic! Sexual arousal became inextricably linked with the anxiety of discovery and fear of disapproval.

Certain behaviours around the existence of these magazines were modelled. What I learnt about sex and porn was that interaction with a spouse was best kept curt and cold, and when the cat was away the mouse would play behind closed doors. When the cabinet drawers grew full, a manila file folder appeared, holding choice pages cut from old issues. This taught me fastidiousness and devotion, and these pages were serviceable and their pleasures enduring. The photo galleries themselves taught me that regular life was a veneer, behind which true eroticism flourished for the bold.

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Watching porn was like sleeping and eating. Just part of me

A porn magazine's depictions of everyday lust are comical to a knowing viewer, but not to a 12-year-old. A female cop is undressed by the trucker she's pulled over. A housewife seduces her female babysitter. In the mags, there was no end to commonplace scenarios that yielded impromptu trysts. Sex-crazed women pervaded all walks of life, holding every post from librarian to park ranger, as eager to flaunt their nudity as I was to see it.

I was hardly away from the cabinet when I began anticipating my return.

I stashed new magazines under my bed, where they were found, of course. But though I'd been grounded for

vandalising houses and other misdeeds, here I was advised, in what was supposed to be a scolding, “You should have put it with your copies of *Rolling Stone*. Your mother wouldn’t have noticed it there.” The messages were all wrong.

1996

I have a home PC, my own apartment and a glorious CD-ROM of 100 free hours of AOL connection time in hand. They give these away at bookstores and even put them in your mail. I get online and my search brings up thousands of results. In no time, I have a photo gallery before me. I click a thumbnail, and watch an image load, slowly down the screen, like sand filling an overturned hourglass.

I don’t go without online porn for another 13 years. The best pictures, I save in a digital manila folder.

I have girlfriends, some of them long-term. But I am oblivious in these relationships. One wants to marry, and I’m tone deaf to this suggestion. A short story I write about this conflict gets me into a graduate programme.

There, living in the UK, I rack up a bill of thousands of pounds with BT on the internet, browsing sites, charging it all to a credit card.

2000

I’m back in the US, working in film and TV production. I go to the office at weekends, telling my girlfriend I’ve forgotten something or have to work on a project. I use the fast internet connection and file-sharing apps to get

videos. I watch them there, and slump in my chair afterwards like a junkie. With the abundance of choice online, and the speeds I'm getting, part of the satisfaction is that of the student overtaking his master.



Benjamin Obler

At home, I stay up late and go online after my girlfriend has gone to bed. When she finds porn sites in the computer's browser history, I say it must have been

spam, launched on its own or something. We fight bitterly. “That’s cheating!” she yells.

I cut the lies and confess to being brought up around this stuff, admitting that it’s always been there. But we are young and we don’t know what to do about it. My girlfriend subscribes to *Martha Stewart Living* magazine - there’s a wreath on our front door, so everything must be all right inside. That’s where we leave it. For years, we repeat this fruitless scene of meltdown and gridlock. When the relationship ends, it’s with a feeling of helplessness and inevitability.

2007

I have just sold my first novel to a publisher, a momentous occasion for me. I’m married, to Diane, an intelligent, mature and successful woman, a writer at heart, like me. We’ve bought a house. I enjoy professional independence and autonomy (perhaps too much). I’m in good health, playing tennis and cycling, in the winter using the company gym. I’m 35 years old and fulfilled.

As a reflection of my fulfilment, my other great interest is more active than ever. I have a fast internet connection, a spiffy PC with the latest hardware (I always made sure of that) and my own office at the back of the house, in which I’ve installed slatted blinds. In other words, I look at all the porn I want to, just as I always have, since I was a boy. It is a pastime, leisure activity, whatever you would call it.

What would you call it? I didn't know. I never called it anything - it was just there like sleeping and eating. It was part of me, though a part that I didn't discuss openly. Early in our dating life, Diane had walked in on me using internet porn, and that led to a conversation in which she professed her own appreciation for it - saying, it's natural, women are beautiful, nothing to be ashamed of, and so on.

But it was not as simple as all that. In my mind, porn use was still something to be kept secret. I used an obscure third-party browser whose history didn't intermingle with Windows' history; over the years, I'd shuffled through newsreaders, file-sharing hubs and arcane media players to get porn. I was accomplished and enjoyed a relationship with certain erotic content, a relationship that no one else on earth knew about.

By many measures, I was happy - but I did not feel well.

For months, I'd been experiencing lethargy, achiness, appetite problems. I was moody, my sleep erratic. I frequently had frightening and violent dreams, my nocturnal kicking and thrashing often waking Diane - driving her to the couch. Food no longer delivered fullness or energy, but made me heavy, sluggish and flatulent. My coffee consumption had risen. I didn't know what was going on. The worst symptom was a feeling that swelled behind my eyes - an itchy, piercing pain. I popped ibuprofen, I stretched, I did deep breathing, I splashed my face with water.

I went on antidepressants. The symptoms eased. I felt better. My diet normalised. Food tasted good again and my body seemed to have remembered how to convert it to energy rather than merely zits and wind. Thank God, I could enjoy life again! As part of my return to health, I returned to the gym, and then one evening I sat down, to enjoy a long session of browsing pictures and videos of young women. I flooded my brain with numbing pleasure - chemicals. Endorphins.

“

Once a woman became a former sexual partner, she had no value

The next day I woke to eyeballs that felt like they'd been baking under a desert sun. Descending the stairs, my legs screamed in cramps. Thinking maybe my muscles needed protein, I made a big breakfast of eggs, juice and toast. But food was like a placebo - nothing. Hit the web, I found myself thinking. Hit the web. That's when I knew there was a problem.

The internet porn addict's brain is rewarded in the same way as a gambling addict's brain. If you want to know the lobes and chemicals involved, that information is available elsewhere. But Anne McBean, director of the Center for Sexual Health, described it best, saying, "I think that internet pornography is like operating a slot machine: it's intermittent reinforcement. You look and you look and you look and you look, trying to find that piece of porn that will just really trip your trigger.

Sometimes you find it and sometimes you don't. And there's just infinite material out there, so you can go on and on looking for it. And intermittent reinforcement: that principle would say that when something is not reinforced all the time, that is the strongest. It's also self-hypnotic. If you've had any difficulty with that, you know what I'm talking about. You get into this bubble, into this space."

These words McBean shared with me in a recorded conversation in her office after my graduation from the men's group, as I prepared to write an essay on the topic.

"So I just think," McBean concluded, "if I happened to believe in the Devil, which I don't, I would say that the Devil designed this machine. It's perfect."

Things got worse before they got better. I was a man divided, wanting the cure but resisting the treatment. At the office, I requested and was approved to work from home part-time, which I promptly and regularly abused. At home, I used porn, lay on the couch in a depressed coma, and even took up online poker. The problem with online gambling for the porn addict is, though it offers a similar escapist high, chance sometimes denies you the reward that porn guarantees. Over two years, I destroyed three laptops with my fist, or shattered their screens by slamming the lid shut.

For good measure, I took up smoking - not for the first time. Did you know that nicotine activates the circuitry that regulates feelings of pleasure, the so-called reward pathways? It increases dopamine, same as an orgasm.

It was, instead, the breakdown of sexual intimacy with Diane that got me into treatment. Though she didn't want me to be ashamed for liking pictures of beautiful, sexy women, at the same time we'd been at an impasse of intimacy for several years. On the matter of our sex life, Diane had stood in our bedroom, dressing the bed with new sheets (symbolically?), saying she had no interest in sex. Hers was a thorough state of mind-body turmoil not unique to this period in her life, but clearly originating, it seemed to me, from that day in 2005 when she'd walked into my apartment to find me at the computer. Diane and I agreeing to seek marriage counselling led us to the Center for Sexual Health.

2015

This is the happy part.

It's February, and I'm in Sri Lanka with a friend and his wife, native Sri Lankans, and my partner, Theresa. We're at a small tourist trap far outside Colombo, a lush little plot of land where plants and herbs for ayurvedic practices are grown. The guide is handing around samples of turmeric and banana leaf, talking about the hazards of "chasing after" money, chasing after sex. Not healthy, he says.

"Preaching to the choir," I wink and joke to my friend. To someone for whom discussion of my habits was a terrorising ordeal, this easeful moment is a long time coming.

“

In therapy our families, our marriages, our lives are at stake

I live in upstate New York now with Theresa, who knows the full scope of my history with pornography. I've come to understand just how deeply my addiction ran. It was not merely that I was a slave to it. My whole sense of self and my relationship to the world has changed; I engage with it now, the world. One of the things all eight of us men learnt in the clinic is that our behaviour, our knee-jerk reaching for porn, is avoidant. We don't deal with our feelings. We have no ability to process stress, anger, worry, fear. We also don't communicate. It's taken me years to build up these skills, but now I have them. So, whereas before, in the initial stages of porn abstinence, I literally felt like the world was coming to an end daily, now I just simply get along better with myself, with the circumstances of my life and with Theresa. Theresa calls me "lover". I call her "babe". Be nauseated if you must, but I treasure this.

My ability to have a relationship like this is the most profound change. I professed love before, to many women, but I didn't know what love is really about. The love I knew was based on shame and need. It was a crutch.

As a young man, an educated person and a person raised in the Catholic Church, I knew, intellectually and morally, the way I ought to regard women. I believed in equality for women, I believed in gender equity. I knew the correct attitudes and how to profess them. However,



woman became a former sexual partner, she had no value to me. As for women I didn't know - I could hardly see an attractive woman in public without looking at her body. Nor could I stop myself from noticing a woman's unattractive features. On the street, in the office and in the supermarket, critical, dismissive thoughts formed in my head at the sight of an unshapely, fat, short, plain, slovenly or ugly woman. The worst offenders were those women who made no effort to make themselves attractive for my sake.

I never told anyone about these thoughts. And I never would have done, knowing them to be socially unacceptable and hideous. I didn't regard them as my beliefs necessarily, yet they were my true operating attitudes: total objectification.

The internet is ubiquitous now and I've had to learn to deal with that. I do fear for the current generation, for whom the proliferation of internet porn is an unmitigated fact. This August, my brother and his family visited from the Midwest. I was excited to see my two nephews, 14 and 8. Dear boys, and the spitting image of my brother and me when we were young. Theresa and I bought a kayak, thinking they'd like to paddle it on the nearby creek. We bought lawn games, thinking they'd play them. No. The two boys each carried an iPad, from which they hardly ever looked up.

Again, naively, I thought they were playing games such as Minecraft. The second day of their visit I was proved

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monthly data cap. Once 15GB are used up, you're put in the slow lane. When my morning news browsing was at a crawl, I checked the app that shows our satellite usage. The boys had devoured an entire month's data in the first 36 hours.



Obler and his partner, Theresa

“Hey! What exactly are you guys doing on there?” I asked.

“YouTube! Duh!” they said.

“It's like TV to them,” my brother explained. “They just watch video after video.”

The idea of boys their age having free (usually unlimited) access to the undiscovered in such quantities

and is even stymied at times by careless headlines that sex addiction doesn't exist, because it can't be measured in the lab.

All told, it took me years from my first inkling towards quitting, years of intense therapy, and it took marital counselling, retreats and lots of hard work for me to achieve total sobriety from the pornography use that I engaged in for so long. As I've advised others, there is no point of no return. It can always be unlearnt. The story can always be rewritten.



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